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RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEAWJA/DEPT OF JUSTICE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

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RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RHEHAAA/THE WHITE HOUSE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TEGUCIGALPA 000886

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/19/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [HO](#)

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR LLORENS BEGINS COURTESY CALLS ON GOH
OFFICIALS, STRESSING GOOD BILATERAL RELATIONS

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Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reasons 1.4 (b & d)

¶1. (C) Summary. After presenting credentials on September 19, the Ambassador began his round of courtesy calls, making sure to see key executive, judicial and legislative contacts first. He paid calls on Vice President Elvin Santos, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Vilma Morales, and President of the Congress Roberto Micheletti on September 23. He carried the message that the USG goal is to fortify strong bilateral relations and work with the Zelaya government, also adding that supporting free and fair elections is paramount. Following the last meeting at the Congress, the Ambassador held a brief press conference that ensured the Honduran people will also receive these messages. End Summary.

Vice President Elvin Santos

¶2. (C) The Ambassador paid a courtesy call on Vice President Elvin Santos at his office in his home. (Note: Santos and the Ambassador both served on the American School Board in the 1990's so they already have a friendly base upon which to build a strong relationship. End Note.) Santos described his entire history with President Zelaya, saying that Zelaya had offered Santos the Vice Presidency in 2003 with the understanding that Santos would utilize his extensive business experience, especially in contracting, and be placed in charge of infrastructure and other projects, as a sort of "infrastructure czar." Santos believed that he contributed positively to the Zelaya campaign through his campaign travel and expected to play a strong role in the general election campaign. But Santos related that as soon as the primary elections took place and Zelaya was declared the Liberal Party candidate, the President began excluding Santos from the inner circle. Santos blamed this on the President of the Liberal Party, Patricia Rodas, who has substantial influence over the President. Santos believed that the turning point in his relations with Zelaya was when Santos made statements to the

press in late 2006 urging Honduras to preserve strong relations with the United States. Despite this, Santos was quick to point out that he is loyal to Zelaya and has a good personal relationship with him.

13. (C) Santos then related his election strategy to the Ambassador. He explained that Mauricio Villeda Bermudez will be standing in for him during the primary elections, and although he may lose some votes without his photo on the ballot, he says polls show he remains in the lead. Santos voiced concern about electoral fraud, but was confident he would do well in the primaries. If he wins the primary elections, Santos said he would present his case to the Supreme Court to resolve the constitutional issue of his candidacy. He implied that he would wait for the next Supreme Court to be elected in March of 2009, because it is expected that the Liberal Party will receive eight of the 15 seats and the National Party will only get seven. (Note: Traditionally, the balance shifts back and forth between the two parties every term, and in the current court, the National Party holds eight seats. End Note.) Santos asked where he stood with the USG, and the Ambassador answered that the USG supports democracy and the constitutional process, and favors no party or candidates in the elections. The Ambassador said that Santos is an asset and has much to offer Honduras, and that he should always consider what is best for the country, which is the viability of its constitutional process. The Ambassador suggested that if he fails to win, Santos still has a promising future in politics and in the private sector.

Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Vilma Morales

14. (C) The Ambassador then paid a courtesy call on Vilma

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Morales, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court accompanied by the DCM. Morales related that she was concerned about the future of Honduras, as it had become extremely polarized. She blamed much of the country's ills on Zelaya, who she said has been irresponsible in his public criticisms and attacks on the court. She characterized Honduras as a "plane without a pilot." Morales said she had tried hard during her tenure to do the right thing and was proud of the court's accomplishments. She opined that supporting the rule of law was key to Honduras' future. The Ambassador agreed that rule of law was paramount and pledged the USG's continued assistance in these efforts. The Ambassador explained that his instructions were to fortify good bilateral relations and work with the Zelaya government. The Ambassador said that the protection of U.S. citizens was a priority issue and briefed the Morales on the number of American citizens who had been victims of crime. He said on occasion he could bring pending cases to her attention. Morales said she would be happy to receive this type of information and said her door was always open.

President of the Congress Roberto Micheletti

15. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by the DCM, first met privately with Micheletti in his office. Several minutes later, Congressional leaders joined the meeting. The Ambassador thanked Micheletti for using his good offices to urge Zelaya to reconsider the cancellation of the credentialing ceremony and simply make it a postponement. The Ambassador told Micheletti that we would seek to get the relationship back on track, although no doubt many in Washington had rightly been upset about the GOH credentialing postponement since it involved Honduras directly in a disagreement between the United States, Bolivia, and Venezuela. The Ambassador reported that he had a good meeting with Zelaya, and that he hoped the President's meetings in the United States went well. He confirmed that he would accompany Zelaya to the Washington executive branch meetings. The Ambassador said that our priorities were to support democracy and the electoral

process. He then mentioned that the Central American Bank for Economic Integration had approved the co-financing of USD130 million for Millennium Challenge Compact road projects, and asked for Micheletti's support in moving the Congress to approve these loans. The Ambassador also raised what he felt would be some of the key issues for his tenure in Honduras, including full implementation of CAFTA, the Merida Initiative, and renewable energy.

¶6. (C) Micheletti affirmed that he maintains great relations with the U.S. Embassy, and hoped to continue to work closely with us. He related that he was very pro-United States, probably due to the fact that he spent several years in New Orleans and Tampa in his youth. Micheletti then invited five congressional leaders from all of the parties to join the conversation. He opined that the United States is Honduras' key strategic partner and agreed that supporting Honduran democracy is the most important issue facing the country at this point. Micheletti said that the goal of the Congress is to ensure that Zelaya serves his entire term and does not leave office one day early, nor one day late. He pledged Congressional support to the National Register of Persons and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to ensure that the institutions are working as they should so that elections can take place. Micheletti then brought up the issue of security and the Merida Initiative, saying that these issues are of the utmost importance to the country's future. He added that drug traffickers represent a grave threat to the country and that the Merida Initiative would go a long way to address this threat.

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Press Conference

¶7. (U) Following the meeting at the Congress, the Ambassador spoke briefly to the press that had gathered outside the Congress to describe his day of meetings with the leaders of the three branches of the country's government. He stated that he was pleased to have presented his credentials, and that in keeping with protocol, he was now paying courtesy calls on leaders in all three branches of government. He took questions on Temporary Protected Status and explained that he would be traveling to the United States to accompany the President in his Washington cabinet-level meetings.

Comment

¶8. (C) The Ambassador took the opportunity of courtesy calls to reach out to all three branches of the Honduran government today -- none of which have the best of relations with Zelaya. He explained to them the USG goal of fortifying bilateral relations and working with the government. The message was well received by all three interlocutors and having the quick press conference ensured that the Honduran public is aware that the relationship is going back to normal.

¶9. (C) While Santos' youth and charisma, major factors in his popularity, were apparent, so was his isolation from the political elite. Micheletti, with the opposite public personality, was clearly in control on his home turf and in command of the major issues facing the country. His comment that Zelaya would serve out his term, "not a day less, not a day more" was a clever way of making it clear that he would neither support an effort to get Zelaya out early, nor allow him to stay past his term, but would support the constitutional process. Morales made it clear that she was a friend of the U.S. and would continue to play that role.

LLORENS